

Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition



Jose Chavez was born in Michoacán, Mexico in 1954. He grew up in a vibrant community that celebrated annual festivals and holy days, perhaps most significantly Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos, or All Saints and All Souls Days). Along with the altars constructed in honor of a deceased loved one adorned with sugar skulls, food, drink, flowers, paper cuts, and images were colorful papier maché sculptures made by *cartoneros* (papier maché artists). These sculptures (*cartoneria*) are typically life sized skeletons playfully clothed and engaged in everyday activities like soccer or driving, or in special events like weddings or funerals. Such figures represent the Mexican attitude toward life and death – that there is little distance between them and the dead should be welcomed joyously and respectfully.

After moving to Milwaukee in 1983, Jose found that being out of his home culture created a need to learn more about it and have deeper understanding of Mexican traditions and history. Jose delved into the research, becoming a self-taught artist in the process. He learned several different types of Mexican traditional art forms such as paper cutting, corn stalk carving, mask making, as well as *cartoneria*. He has been producing papier maché sculptures since 1999. Working as a fulltime accountant until recently, he now devotes all his time to creating his art.

Jose taught his apprentice Emiliano Lake-Herrera all the processes and techniques that relate to *cartoneria*: design concepts with small clay mock-ups, mold making using traditional (wood or clay) and innovative (pink insulation) materials, plaster of Paris casting, traditional papier maché paste preparation (*engrudo*), paper application, paper release and assembly, priming and painting, and the contextual history of the art form.

Through this teaching/learning process, Jose and Emiliano created a life sized skeleton sculpture of Marilyn Monroe, three skeleton musicians, and a grouping of Mexican wrestlers. They exhibited their finished works at multiple public sites within and outside the Milwaukee Mexican community.

Emiliano explained his objective as an apprentice, "To learn more and more about traditional Mexican art forms so that I may preserve these traditions, and incorporate the techniques into my own work so that they do not die out. I hope that some day I can teach others the things that I am learning."

"I am always doing research on my culture and traditions." Jose Chavez